

TREES AND SCENTS IN TANAK

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RESUMEN: La fragancia tiene diversos significados religiosos en el antiguo Oriente Próximo. En este estudio se consideran aspectos que conciernen a esta cuestión en la tradición de Israel. La investigación se centra en fuentes que contienen multitud de referencias sobre especias aromáticas, entre ellos el Talmud o el Libro de los Reyes. Como conclusión, la liturgia empleó un cuidado especial en la preparación de plantas o productos aromáticos, incluyendo el aceite.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Fragancia. Antiguo Israel. Talmud. Hebreo. Libro de los Reyes. Cedro del Líbano.

ABSTRACT: Fragrance has also various religious meanings in the ancient Near East. Here we consider particular aspects of the matter in Israel. The research is focused in sources containing many citations about aromatic scents, such as the Talmud or the Book of Kings. As a conclusion, the liturgy employed special care in the preparation of plants or aromatic commodities, including oil.

For Israel culture as well as for archaic Ancient Near East cultures, delightful fragrance was of much greater importance than today in the West. Various scents were used by Israel women: "Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates with choice fruits, with henna¹ and nard², nard and saffron³, calamus and cinnamon,

¹ *Lawsonia inermis* it is used for cosmetics as yellow or red colour for hair or complexion, yellow flowers have strong fragrance and so they are used for perfumes. The fragrance is perhaps identical with the fragrance of cyprinum, according to Plinius Secundus it is called after *Cyprus*. Plinius Secundus: *Historia naturalis* XIII, 4. (online). (quoted 12 May 2007) <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/pliny1.html>.

² Nard is an aromatic quack or oil made from the root of plant *Nardostachys iatamensis* growing in east Asia. In the ancient times it was a precious commodity of international trade.

³ Saffron, *Crocus sativus* is still used as a spice and a medicine. Only stigma is harvested

with every kind of incense tree, with myrrh and aloes and all the finest spices."⁴ Men as well used fragrances for various occasions: "Mar Zutra b. Tobiah further said in the name of Rab: The young men of Israel are destined to emit a sweet fragrance like Lebanon, as it says His branches shall spread, and his beauty shall be as the olive tree, and his fragrance as Lebanon."⁵

Fragrance was not only a sense experience but it carried many various religious meanings. The quoted verse from The Song depicts a scent of The Loved One (Her) and it names the ingredients of the incense. This shows the religious content of The Song. There is a meaning behind the fragrance that smell is the most spiritual of human senses:

"R. Giddal said in the name of Rab: Over jasmine the blessing is, *who*⁶ *createst fragrant woods*'. R. Hananel said in the name of Rab: Over sea-rush the blessing is, *who createst fragrant woods*'. Said Mar Zutra: What Scriptural verse confirms this? She had brought them up to the roof and hid then, with the stalks of fax.⁷ R. Mesharsheya said: Over garden narcissus the blessing is, *who createst fragrant woods*'; over wild narcissus, *who createst fragrant herbs*'. R. Shesheth said: Over violets the blessing is, *who createst fragrant herbs*'. Mar Zutra said: He who smells a citron or a quince should say, *Blessed be He who has given a sweet odour to fruits*'. Rab Judah says: If one goes abroad in the days of Nisan⁸ and sees the trees sprouting, he should say, *Blessed be He who hath not left His world lacking in anything and has created in it goodly creatures and goodly trees for the enjoyment of mankind*'. R. Zutra b. Tobiah said in the name of Rab: Whence do we learn that a blessing should be said over sweet odours? Because it says, *Let every soul praise the Lord*.⁹ What is that which gives enjoyment to the soul and not to the body? — You must say that this is fragrant smell."¹⁰

Deities fed themselves according to ancient thinking with smell of sacrificial meal, the fragrance which is the essence of the sacrifice, it lifts to heavens and it is accepted with gratitude then the smell of burnt meat and fat was considered to be the most delightful for a deity in ancient times.¹¹

and we can get from it a precious yellow colour which is used for colouring of clothes, food and drinks.

⁴ Song 4:13.14.

⁵ Talmud. Berakot 43b The Babylonian Talmud. Edited by Rabbi Dr. Isidore Epstein of Jews' College. London. (online). (quoted 12 May 2007) <http://www.come-and-hear.com/talmud/>.

⁶ The benediction always begins with omitted words "Blessed are, Thee, Lord, our God, King of the world, who...".

⁷ The sea grass is compared to "tow" because it has thin leaves as tow has thin stigma.

⁸ Nisan is in spring (March to April).

⁹ Ps 150:6.

¹⁰ Talmud. Berakot 43b The Babylonian Talmud. Edited by Rabbi Dr. Isidore Epstein of Jews' College. London. (online). (quoted 12 May 2007) <http://www.come-and-hear.com/talmud/>.

¹¹ Gen 8:21.

The altar smell was a medium between heaven and earth which carried prayers. We can find support for this argument in the language. Hebrew verb for smelling has the root Resh – Vav – Het, the same as wind, breeze, but spirit in the strong meaning, thus “*ru’ah*”. The noun fragrance (scent, smell) is then “*re’ah*”. The scent was of a great value in profane and sacral lives and the scent is an unneglectable product of certain trees, it gave them high degree of dignity and importance in cultic life.

According to an old Jerusalem legend there grew two cedar trees at The Mount of Olives during the glorious times of Jerusalem. Those cedars were replanted by Nebuchadnezzar into his garden. When he died both cedars rejoiced. There grew some cinamon trees too: “*Cinamon trees grew in the land of Israel and they were food for goats and hinds.*”¹² Cinamon wood was used as fuel in Jerusalem and its fragrance was propagated in the whole land of Israel. “*But when it was destroyed, only seeds were saved. They were found in the treasury of queen Zimzemai.*”¹³

In The Song the Lover sings about his Lovedone “*Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride; milk and honey are under your tongue. The fragrance of your garments is like that of Lebanon.*”¹⁴

Without any doubt he means cedars of Lebanon¹⁵ which were valued for their high quality wood which was used for constructions and decorations¹⁶ but they were appreciated for special fragrance which had the ability to preserve against dissolution, perdition and death. This resistance and endurance of cedars caused awe: Hebrew word *aruz* derived from cedar *erez* has meaning “*firm*”, “*durable*”. Pharaoh’s funeral ship was made from aromatic cedar tree to preserve his body, the doors of palaces and temples which were barrier between different stages of the sacred, covering of the walls and liturgical tools were made from cedar too.

In The Song the fragrance of the Lovedone symbolizes sacredness, firmness and immortality of love. Not only cedars scatter their fragrance coniferous, resin, flowers and fruits of various trees too: “*My lover is to me a sachet of myrrh resting between my breasts. My lover is to me a cluster of henna blossoms from the vineyards of En Gedi.*”¹⁷

¹² Vilnay, Zev. *Legendy Jeruzaléma*, Praha: Volvox Globator. 2000, p. 245.

¹³ Talmud. Shabbat 63a. Yerushalmi. Pe’ah 7. Quoted from: Vilnay, Zev. *Legendy Jeruzaléma*, Praha: Volvox Globator. 2000, p. 245.

¹⁴ Song 4:11.

¹⁵ Cedar of Libanon, *Cedrus libani*, in Hebrew “*erez*” is mentioned more than seventy-five times in Tanakh.

¹⁶ King Solomon built his great palace made from cedar wood called “House of Lebanon forrest”, he built from the same material the throne hall and house for pharaoh’s daughter. 1 Kings 7:2-12.

¹⁷ Song 1:13-14.

¹⁸ "The fig tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance. Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me."¹⁸

¹⁹ The Song is full of those metaphors and pictures of love, the bride is depicted as a garden full of flowers and trees, these are not only erotic metaphors, but very strong religious symbols either understood in archaic form as attributes of pre-israelite New Year ceremony *hieros gamos* or in new and orthodox understanding as an allegory of God – Israel relationship of love. The fragrance of certain plants has its role during liturgy of biblical holiday *Sukkot*, when the smelling to *etrog*¹⁹, one of four prescribed kinds of trees²⁰ is part of holy delight and leaves of myrtle, bond in *lulav*²¹, give a nice fragrance.

The fragrance of myrtle²² was very popular and in Talmud there is mentioned a debate on how to worship myrtle: "Our Rabbis taught: If oil and myrtle are brought before one, Beth Shammai say that he first says a benediction over the oil and then over the myrtle, while Beth Hillel say that he first says a benediction over the myrtle and then over the oil. Said Rabban Gamaliel: I will turn the scale. Of oil we have the benefit both for smelling and for anointing; of myrtle we have the benefit for smelling but not for anointing. R. Johanan said: The halachah follows the one who turned the scale. R. Papa was once visiting R. Huna the son of R. Ika. Oil and myrtle were brought before him and he took up the myrtle and said the blessing over it first, and then he said the blessing over the oil. Said the other to him: Does not your honour hold that the halachah follows the one who turned the scale? He replied: Thus said Raba: The halachah follows Beth Hillel. This was not correct, however; he said so only to excuse himself."²³

Smelling to spices for comfort in sorrow about departing of Shabbat is part of the ceremony of *havdalah*. It is said a special benediction: "Praised be Lord,

¹⁸ Song 2:13.

¹⁹ *Etoq*, Lev 23:40. In the ancient times this term was connected with cedar for unclear reasons "*Cedrides, hoc est fructus cedri*" (Plinius Secundus). The fruit called in Hebrew "*peretz hadar*" is a strong aromatic citrus fruit of a tree *Citrus medica* which is similar to lemon. According to Plinius Secundus it has analgetic effect "*Cedrus magna, quam cedrelaten vocant, dat pitem, quam cedria vocatur, dentium doloribus utilissimam. frangit enim eos et extrahit, dolores sedat. cedri sucus ex ea quomodo fieret diximus. magni ad volumina usus, ni capiti dolorem inferret, defuncta corpora incorrupta aëvis servat, viventia corrumpit, mira differentia, cum vitam auferat spirantibus defunctisque pro vita sit.*"

²⁰ Four kinds, in Hebrew "*arba'ah minim*", according to Lev 23 they have a special role in liturgy, the citrus fruit and palm branches, myrtle and willow. These branches are bond in *lulav* and during *Hallel* people wave with them to all sides.

²¹ *Lulav* is a palm branch, it is also a bunch of tree branches used during *Sukkot*.

²² Myrtle, in Hebrew "*hadas*" is in the root of name of Esther – Hadassah. It was certainly a complimentary name, even though some Talmud scholars think that Esther was green, thus ugly.

²³ Talmud. Berakot 43b: The Babylonian Talmud. Edited by Rabbi Dr. Isidore Epstein of Jews' College. London. (online).(quoted 13 May 2007) <http://www.come-and-hear.com/talmud/>.

our God, King of the world who created various types of spices."²⁴ At the time of Jerusalem Temple when sacrifices were obligatory part of worship, daily use of the incense was compulsory, the incense was a product of some trees.²⁵ The incense was used not only in liturgy but in cosmetics, medicine, it was highly valued and it was a subject of international trade. According to commands of Torah²⁶ *ketoret*, incense blend for liturgy was prepared from drops *nataf*, balsam from resin of bals²⁷, from aromatic shells perhaps *Strombus diana*²⁸, *shehelet*, from galbanum called *helbenah*²⁹ and from incense *levonah*³⁰. These ingredients were blended, rubbed and refined.³¹ That blend was prohibited for private use. If anybody burnt the incense only for his pleasure, he would have been excommunicated.³²

Rashi as well as many other commentators thinks that the term *shehelet* can not be defined as a kind of shell, so that is a name of a plant. "It is a smooth aromatic root, translucent like a nail. In the language of Mishnah it is called "tzipporen" and that is why Onkelos translates it as "tufra" into Aramaic." All mentioned translations mean "a nail". *Galbanum* – it is a smelling spice (stinky) which is called *galbanum*. The Scripture includes it among aromatic of the incense to learn that we should not despise sinners of Israel in our prayer meetings because they are part of our fellowship.

There are several types of *ferula* from which we get the aromatic essence. In a small amount it is aromatic but in a large one it has a very uncomfortable smell like an old garlic. The Czech folk name for it is "devil excrement". Rashi means

²⁴ Sichat Jicchak. Prof. S.J. Kaempfa Modlitby pro všechny dny všední, sabaty a svátky jakož i Jom Kipur Kátan. Translated by Moric Kraus. Samuel W. Pascheles a syn. Praha 1937. p. 268.

²⁵ It is *Boswellia sacra*, a small tree growing in Near East and in east Africa, its aromatic resin was an important trade commodity of ancient Orient. It was used in cosmetics and in liturgy. It is probable that for smoking could be used also even resins of other aromatic trees and creeks.

²⁶ Ex 30:34-38.

²⁷ Shellac from plant *Commiphora opobalsamum*, the Hebrew name comes from the root Nun – Tav – Pe which means "to drip", "to drop", figuratively "resin" is a name of an aromatic plant.

²⁸ *Strombus diana*, in Greek "onychia", its shell has a "lid" which is similar to a nail. These shells have a special fragrance when they burn.

²⁹ Galbanum is an aromatic resin gained from *Ferula*, *Ferula galbaniflua* or *Ferula ribricaulis*.

³⁰ *Boswellia cartegii*, *Boswellia sacra* or *Styrax officinalis*.

³¹ The word "memullah" it is possible to derive it from the root Mem – Lamed – Het (*melah*). Salt was used as a purifying material for liturgical purposes. Rashi tries to translate this word like "loose" and he puts it in context with the root Mem – Lamed – Het, but in the sense – sailors, "ha-mallahim". The sailors – *mallahim* are people steering the ship in salty water.

³² There is used a verb "nhirat", excommunicated, cut out. The explanation of this punishment is not completely clear even in Talmud, according to tract *Mo'ed Katan 28a* "cutting out" means death at fifty years when the repentant sinner is whipped, he is declared innocent according to tract *Makkot III,15*. It is a category of punishments which belong to Lord competence.

this uncomfortable experience which contradicts the image of a noble ingredient of incense, and he follows his homiletic procedure when he concludes from the stinky essence moral imperative not to despise the sinner. Resin from *ferula* which stinks at first but then it changes into aromatic essence, it is a symbol of a repentant sinner. Rashi names aromatic essences: "Pure incense - That is why our rabbis teach that Moses was given twelve types of aroma at Sinai. The smallest number of aroma is two. Resin, mussell and galbanum are three types, altogether five. The second term "aromatics" includes the same number of types, altogether ten. And incense, it is altogether eleven. And there are following aromatics: bals, mussells, galbanum, incense, myrrh, cassia, nard and saffron, it is altogether eight because cassia and nard are the same and nard is similar to saffron. Then *costus*³³, aromatic bark, it is altogether eleven."

After weighing out of necessary components it was to preserve the same rates of weight because an accurate measuring is characteristic for special, sacred incense. The salt was disputable: "You will make the incense by blending, quacking, loose, pure, holy."

"Loose"³⁴ – as it is translated in Targum "blending of blended" which means that its parts must be properly blended. But I say that it reminds me the verse "All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep."³⁵ or "our wealth, merchandise and wares, your mariners, seamen and shipwrights, your merchants and all your soldiers, and everyone else on board will sink into the heart of the sea on the day of your shipwreck."³⁶

They are called like that because they row in the water to move the ship, it is similar when somebody blends broken eggs with water. Whatever a man wishes to blend properly, he turns it by a finger or a spoon." It is a remarkable attempt of traditional translators to explain an obscure term "*memullah*" which expresses meaning "blended could mean salted". Rashi tries to synchronise both meanings by complicated comparing of rowing sailors to blending of incense blend.

The presence of incense smoke was a visible sign of Shekhinah. It itself could have been theologically suspectable because people could interpret the presence of smoke magically, the fragrance of the incense attracts the deity as well as it was interpreted in some non-israelite practices and cults. Specific fragrances could not have been resisted by gods and that way it was possible to manipu-

³³ *Costus speciosus* originally from India is a relative of ginger, it is still used in folk medicine in Asia. If it is an aroma called oil of Costus – Root which is still used for perfumes then it could be a different plant – *Saussurea lappa*.

³⁴ There is used the term *memullah*.

³⁵ Jon 1:5.

³⁶ Ezek 27:27.

late them. Then it follows the warning of the tabuization of the incense and the emphasis of the dedication to Lord: *"do not make any incense with this formula for yourselves; consider it holy to the LORD. Whoever makes any like it to enjoy its fragrance must be cut off from his people."*³⁷

But Rashi clarifies the permission for incense makers who probably were suppliers of fragrant materials for the Temple worship, the tabu is relegated to the intention: *"to smell it."*

But you are allowed to make it in the same manner to sell it in the community."

The production was very early separated from the sacrifice. We can deduce from it that the profession of a chemist, a herbalist or a producer of ointment was an independent job.

Apart from very obscure information about aromatic shells, other ingredients of the incense blend and sacred oil come from the plant realm, many come from trees and sometimes there were imported very precious materials from abroad. The Talmud tradition is aware of the fact that the majority of fragrances comes from trees.

The fragrance was so important in the Orient that it occurred not only in secular use but mainly in religious one. The "orant" enters the presence of the divinity washed, dressed in his best clothes and decorated by jewels,³⁸ eventually with various wreaths and perfumed. The scent was the visible expression of sanctification and blessing. Isaac greets his younger son Jacob to give him a benediction: *"So he went to him and kissed him. When Isaac caught the smell of his clothes, he blessed him and said, "Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that the LORD has blessed."*³⁹

Rashi makes a note on that verse and comments the fact Jacob had covered his arms by goat skin to mystify his father pretending to be his firstborn Esau⁴⁰ *"And he smelt, etc."* – *"There exists perhaps worse stink than stink of goats. You should learn from it that there came a fragrance with him to garden Eden. Like a fragrance of field which is blessed by Lord. – The Holy One, Be blessed, send him then the fragrance of apple orchard. So that our Rabbis explain that."*⁴¹

According to tradition Rashi explains that the unpleasant smell of goat skin was transformed by Lord into a nice scent because he was in agreement with Jacob cheating and he counted him as the firstborn. The fragrance of apple trees was his proof for his blind father. The term "apple tree" *tappu'ah* could mean

³⁷ Ex 30:37-38.

³⁸ Jewels and others decorations were rarely without any religious or magic meaning.

³⁹ Gen 27:27.

⁴⁰ Rashi commentary to Tanak. Toledot (online), (quoted 12 May 2007) <http://www.olam.cz/>.

⁴¹ Talmud. Ta'anit 29b.

quince which is typical for its specific aroma, it was also an attribute of Near Eastern Goddesses. Similarly the Lovedone sitting in the shadow of the apple tree is happy because of her Lover, Jacob uses his father protection, favour and love, in both cases it is love and blessing of Lord. There is said a special benediction above the oil and wine and both compete about the first place of honour. *"Our Rabbis taught: If oil and wine are brought before one, Beth Shammai say that he first takes the oil in his right hand and the wine in his left hand and says a blessing over the oil and then a blessing over the wine. Beth Hillel, however, say that he takes the wine in his right hand and the oil in his left, and says the blessing over the wine and then over the oil. [Before going out] he smears it on the head of the attendant; and if the attendant is a man of learning, he smears it on the wall, since it is unbecoming for a scholar to go abroad scented."*⁴²

The inauguration of prophets, priests and Israel kings was connected with anointing by aromatic oil. The liturgical instruments⁴³ had to be anointed according to Moses instructions⁴⁴ by specially prepared olive oil with some aroma. Its use for priestly purposes was regulated by strict rules, in case of abuse of the sacred oil, the punishment was excommunication.

The preparation of oil was very carefully done with special care, the olive oil was made aromatic by liquid myrrh⁴⁵, balsam cinnamon⁴⁶, calamus⁴⁷, cassia⁴⁸. Cinnamon was not grown in Canaan, its bark was imported from Arabia or even from India. It could have been a different kind of a tree with aromatic bark or wood. All components of sacred oil were very precious. The oil fragrance was very strong because the ratio of aromatic fragrances was very high in comparison to oil. The Talmud scholars did not know the original Temple worship but they were amazed by very unusual concentration of aromatic material in the oil and they concluded it was an analogy to cosmetics production. The question is how the procedure would pass the practical test. *"And you will make the oil by holy anointing⁴⁹, quack blended by quackish manner. It will be the oil of holy anointing."*

⁴² Talmud. Berakot 43b The Babylonian Talmud. Edited by Rabbi Dr. Isidore Epstein of Jews' College. London. (online). (quoted 13. May 2007) <http://www.come-and-hear.com/talmud/>.

⁴³ In Hebrew "klei kodesh", things dedicated to Temple and thus tabu.

⁴⁴ Ex 30:22-33.

⁴⁵ Balsamodendron myrrha or Commiphora abyssinica, in Hebrew "mar dror".

⁴⁶ Balsam cinnamon, in Hebrew "kinneman besem", "kinnamon" is an extract of tree bark Cinnamomum ceylonicum.

⁴⁷ Perhaps an aromatic root Calamus odoratus or Acorus calamus, in Hebrew "keneh bosem" it could be an aromatic plant similar to reed (rush).

⁴⁸ In Hebrew "kiddah" ("keči'ah" in Ps 45:9, Cassia lignea) Senna didymobotra. It does not have to be botanic gender cassia or senna, but it could be any aromatic material, perhaps a product of Cinnamomum cassia.

⁴⁹ In Hebrew "shemen misqhat kodesh".

Anointing of sacred oil meant dedication of liturgical instrument for the worship and its exclusion for any secular use. Jacob anointed *mazzevah* by oil which he erected in *Bethel*⁵⁰, so that he separated those stones from others and he made it a symbol of divinity, place of *Shekhinah*.

The benediction and dedication transmitted by special way onto people and things that are in contact with the anointed one, on the other hand the sacred can be defiled by contact with ritually unclean "You shall consecrate them so they will be most holy, and whatever touches them will be holy."⁵¹

Everything what is ritually suitable is made holy in contact with holy-sacred it can be defiled when it leaves the sacred temple area or when it meets "*tevul yom*"⁵². It is not possible to redeem such a thing to become "*hullin*"⁵³. But thing which is not ritually suitable is not made sacred in contact with anointed thing.

Unanointed man was not allowed to use the oil, the ingredients were not important but their ratio, so according to the tradition it was allowed to use the imitation of the aromatic oil, even the ratio of ingredients was a little bit different. "Whoever makes any like it to enjoy its fragrance must be cut off from his people."⁵⁴

A person promoted to an exclusive state was spreading around him (her) strong fragrance which expressed his (her) holiness and blessing. Olive oil with aromatic spices was a necessary condition for acknowledging of a prophet, anointing of a priest and inauguration of a king, from its use there is a word *mashi'ah* – Messiah. The coming messiah will smell good as well as prophet, priest and king.

⁵⁰ Gen 28:10-22.

⁵¹ Ex 30:29.

⁵² "*Tevul yom*" is ritually unclean person at the end of the purifying period when he is after a ritual bath and he has to wait till the sunset before he is ritually clean and he is allowed to receive the sacraments.

⁵³ "*hullin*" is a common meal.

⁵⁴ Ex 30:38.